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# Hermeneutical Interpretations in Ethnographies of Innovations. From New Ideas to Social Innovations

Anika Noack\*

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**Abstract:** »Hermeneutische Interpretationsverfahren in Innovationsethnografien: Von neuen Ideen zu sozialen Innovationen«. By using the example of spatial pioneers from civil society, who are committed to the field of social urban development in Berlin Moabit, the article introduces hermeneutical interpretation methods for analyzing the communicative genesis of social innovations in their initial phases. Under the umbrella of focused ethnography participant observations, problem-centered interviews, qualitative network, as well as documents and discourse analyses are triangulated. In terms of data analysis, apart from procedures of grounded theory, in innovation literature hardly proven hermeneutical interpretation methods are deployed: sociological hermeneutics and the analysis of communication genres.

**Keywords:** Social innovations, hermeneutics, ethnographies of innovations, communication genre, spatial pioneers, communicative genesis of innovations.

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## 1. The Lack of Hermeneutics in Ethnographies of Innovations or Why Innovation Research Needs to Focus on Face-to-Face Communications

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So far, sociological research on innovations has merely restricted itself to a reconstructive method of analysis following its ex-post-labeling as an innovation (cf. Braun-Thürmann and John 2010, 56). In particular, this is the case for approaches that limit themselves to the reconstruction of 'successful innovation careers' (cf. Neuloh 1977, 28) and post-hoc rationalization (cf. Hoholm and Olsen 2013). In those approaches, key resistances, controversies, conflicts and power struggles as major components of innovation processes remain mostly unseen.

Against this background, a big community of researchers on (social) innovations clearly calls for process studies (cf. Jessop et al. 2013; Pavitt 2005; Van de Ven and Poole 2005). Those process approaches are first and foremost realized in ethnographical studies (cf. Law 2004; Latour 2005). With their focus on

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knowledge production and transformation, ethnographical approaches like actor network theory are interested in the research question of how innovations come into being. Ethnographies of innovations either put stress on the temporal structure of those processes – including all the turnarounds, breakages and recursive paths innovation processes are characterized for – or on their contextual (pre-)conditions and institutional rules, practices and structures. Even science and technology studies (cf. Hoholm and Olsen 2013) are realizing the advantages of ethnographical approaches. They are mostly adopting ethnographical methods – mostly participant observations combined with interview-techniques – for researching technological innovation processes in vivo (cf. Jungmann et al. 2015). What more or less all ethnographical approaches on innovation have in common – whether applied in social sciences, technology studies or economics – is the claim that innovation processes depend on and are shaped by communications<sup>1</sup> and interactions with others (cf. Håkansson and Waluszewski 2007; Hoholm and Olsen 2013). But Law's suggestion to "start out with interaction, and assume that interaction is all there is" (cf. Law 1992, 380) is not really taken seriously by these authors. They shed light on processes of knowledge exchange between heterogeneous actors and actor constellations. However, face-to-face communications with a focus on the negotiation of new, potentially innovative ideas are not analyzed in detail, especially not in reference to hermeneutical interpretation methods. By way of interpretation methods, communicative actions are interpreted step by step with "recourse to the [...] typically understood subjective meaning of the utterance as a meaningful designed action of an actor" (Knoblauch 1995, 95).<sup>2</sup> It is Staples (2014) who conceptualizes innovations as specific social practice as a type of communicative action (cf. Staples 2014). While he is making use of quasi-experimental designs for observing the interplay between new communicative practices and their situational context (cf. Staples 2014), my aim is to concentrate mostly on interactional patterns of spoken language between different actors from civil society who are negotiating new, experimental and original space-related ideas.

Since there are always several actors involved in innovation processes (cf. Braun-Thürmann 2005, 6-7) it is necessary to coordinate actions. For this purpose, face-to-face communications are crucial. In processes of communication, heterogeneous perspectives and interests meet, new ideas and socio-spatial visions are – sometimes confrontationally – exchanged, which have to be mediated, transformed and made compatible by communications again to unfold

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<sup>1</sup> Knoblauch understands communication as "action, which, taking effect on the environment, employs symbols and is orientated towards others: mutual symbolic action" (Knoblauch 1995, 53).

<sup>2</sup> The reflexivity of everyday actions is a methodological requirement for understanding the typical subjectively intended meaning of actions. Thus, while acting the actors show how they want their actions to be understood (cf. Knoblauch 1995, 89).

efficacy (cf. Christmann and Büttner 2011). This assumption goes back to the theory of the social construction of reality by Berger and Luckmann (1966). Luckmann himself (1995), together with Knoblauch (1995, 2013), extended the theory as part of the linguistic turn in sociology to the communicative constructivism. In this theoretical perspective, communication and knowledge are perceived as central organizing principles to describe and explain social phenomena and societal change. The reality and with it the social order, norms and values that are crucial for social actions are changed by communicative actions in everyday life (cf. Knoblauch et al. 2013). Therefore, processes of communication are predominantly a medium of externalizing new ideas, their objectivation and internalization by others as innovations. Even more, communication is relevant in all phases of the innovation process: when a possibly innovative idea is negotiated communicatively among different actors, but also when it is communicatively and discursively spread.

Although this is common knowledge and innovation research has changed its focus from a perspective on a Schumpeterian single innovator to innovation networks (cf. Ibert 2003, 142; Freeman 1991), one cannot identify many empirical case studies in innovation literature that take communication seriously. Therefore, this paper draws analytical attention to the invention phase of social innovations by observing the communicative negotiation processes of new, potentially innovative ideas in three different spatial pioneer<sup>3</sup> initiatives in Berlin Moabit. Under the umbrella of a focused ethnography (cf. Knoblauch 2001) participant observations, problem-centered interviews as well as qualitative network data and public documents are triangulated for data collection. For data analysis and interpretation, next to network and discourse analysis in innovation literature, hardly proven hermeneutical methods like the sociology of knowledge approach to hermeneutics and communication genre<sup>4</sup> analysis are deployed.

Those interpretation techniques of face-to-face communications in the initial invention phases of social innovations *in potentia* offer an empirically profound analysis of as well as new insights in the communicative genesis of social innovations. Only through this analysis can I reveal what influence specific patterns of communication, established role models, processes of power, conflict negotiation processes as well as intra-group positions of creative minds

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<sup>3</sup> Spatial pioneers are actors and groups of actors that go beyond their own spatial interests and initiate, encourage and socially maintain innovative solutions for local social problems in urban quarters.

<sup>4</sup> Communication genres are to be understood as "socially constructed solutions which organize, routinize, and standardize the dealing with particular communicative problems" (Günthner and Knoblauch 1995, 6). Communication genres structure communicative actions and provide lexically formalized and typical beginnings, process forms and termination sequences for communications. Thus, the occurrence of a communicative genre feature (for example, a call for new ideas) is necessarily followed by other expectable communicative action steps (here: the creation of an idea or its negation) (cf. Günthner and Knoblauch 1994, 702f).

have on the introduction, the adaptation and the joint development of innovative ideas. This approach also makes clear – and it might indeed be surprising – that of all things the communication of innovations, generally being characterized as experimental, focuses on ritualized communication patterns and standardized communicative forms. Thus, the communicative negotiation about innovative ideas proceeds according to typical sequences and is simultaneously linked to the adoption of certain communicative roles.

Before this article will finally reflect on those fruitful insights as opportunities (as well as on challenges) of hermeneutical interpretations in ethnographies of innovations (chapter 5), I will make clear my definition of social innovations (chapter 2). If my conception of innovation also includes innovations that are neither intended, nor semantically denoted as such, I have to answer the question how it is possible to comprehend methodologically that I observe innovations *in vivo*. Therefore, theoretically I rely on communicative constructivism (cf. Knoblauch 1995, 2013). Before the paper demonstrates the application of hermeneutical interpretations in the communicative genesis of new ideas by spatial pioneers as its main part (chapter 4), it describes the triangulation of different qualitative methods under the umbrella of focused ethnography (chapter 3).

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## 2. The Communicative Construction of Social Innovations

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The concept of social innovation was only scarcely used in social sciences during the 1970s and 80s (cf. Neuloh 1977; Chambon et al. 1982; Zapf 1989). In the past few years it has attracted more and more research attention, especially forced by Howaldt and Schwarz (2010), Rammert (2010, 2013), Moulaert et al. (2010a, 2010b, 2013), Mulgan et al. (2007) and Mumford (2002). This tendency is accompanied by a million Google hits and a growing political interest, which makes it a catch-all concept (Moulaert et al. 2010a). However, “the field of social innovation [is] relatively undeveloped” (Mulgan et al. 2007, 3), which is why diverse definitions of the term coexist. My understanding of social innovations is mostly shaped by thoughts of Rammert, Howaldt and Schwarz as well as by Moulaert – be it very close or delimitative. To put their definitions of social innovations into a discussion with each other was the most inspiring way of developing my definition.

Moulaert was an inspirational source in two ways. First, he is one of the most important researchers who are embedding social innovations in community and spatial development processes. This means for my understanding that any socially innovative initiative is inevitably embedded in a (restructuring) spatial context (cf. Moulaert et al. 2010a). Second, by identifying three dimensions of social innovations: the satisfaction of unfulfilled social needs, the empowerment of marginalized and socially excluded groups and the construction and alteration of network relationships, e.g. between civil society actors

and policymakers (cf. Moulaert 2010, 4), he moved my perspective not only towards effects but also towards social problems and unmet social needs as motives of social innovations. Whether innovative solutions for local problems were indeed intended as such by their inventors remains a blind spot in his approach. Different from Moulaert, Schwarz et al. take this into account:

Social innovations originate from specific actors and constellations of actors and consist of intentional, targeted reconfigurations of social practices at the interfaces between different social contexts and rationalities and aim at solving problems differently and satisfy needs differently and usually have an ambivalent, not necessarily “positive” impact (Schwarz et al. 2010, 174-5).

Schwarz et al. as well as Moulaert share the assumption of social innovations as being redefinitions of knowledge and practices with the potential to solve common problems and satisfy social needs. This represents a minimal consensus among a range of definitions. According to Schwarz et al., such processes are always initiated intentionally and purposefully, though not precluding effects that were not intended or planned initially (cf. Howaldt and Schwarz 2010, 92). However, based on my own empirical research I consider this understanding of Schwarz and Howaldt to be narrow and insufficient. In some cases, actors do not even realize that they are introducing a local innovation with transformative potential. To also have a look at those unintended innovations as well as on intended ones or even on pseudo-innovations I refer to Rammert (2010, 2013). His distinction among three levels of innovation takes exactly my empirical observations into account.

Rammert (2010, 24) distinguishes the semantic level of innovation discourses from the pragmatic level of innovative actions and the grammatical level that represents regimes of rules. An innovation on the semantic level occurs when “an idea, a practice or an object is perceived as something new and superior and is communicated as such to be deemed an innovation” (Rammert 2010, 34). But innovations are not solely to be experienced through their semantic effect. According to Rammert, new ideas and practices can also be observed on the pragmatic level, without necessarily being referred to or perceived as such. If innovative activities are conceived of as being communicative – and this is what I assume here – and reflexive, actors do not only say something but also indicate what they are doing and how they want their acting to be understood (cf. Knoblauch 1995, 54). Thus, in the performance of action, it becomes apparent whether and how something new is being created. To sum it up, I understand social innovations as being *newly recombined and variegated knowledge and practices that are legitimated as something new and superior in society and transferred to new spatial contexts. Those processes are first and foremost initiated communicatively by actors and networks. They proceed intentionally on the semantic level, but also (not-intended) on the pragmatic and grammatical level. All in all, they have an impact on the transformation of societal knowledge and social practices as well as on social change in general.*

Although Rammert, Moulaert, as well as Howaldt and Schwarz, contributed a lot to my conceptual knowledge of innovations, their focus on face-to-face communications is very limited. Indeed, Rammert's conception of innovation includes innovations that are semantically not denoted as such, but initiated by communicative practices on the pragmatic level. Those communicative actions are neither analyzed nor interpreted in detail. But how can I comprehend methodologically that what I observe are communicative constructions of social innovations in potentia in inventional phases of innovation processes? What are observable manifestations for negotiation processes of real-time innovations?

First of all, the communicative exchange about ideas, the search for experiments, difference and originality as well as the collection of ideas can be seen as a starting point from which the communicative genesis of innovations becomes visible. This is empirically observable in public sessions of civil associations without the participants necessarily following a paradigm of innovation. Ideas are commonly conceived of as a preliminary stage of social innovations, even though they "must be integrated in everyday behavior, otherwise they remain mere ideas" (2000, 32), as Gillwald puts it. Not only where new ideas are invented, also where old ideas are devaluated or expectations are irritated can you find space for negotiating potentially innovative ideas.

Communicative forms as specific conditions of contexts are also an observable manifestation of negotiating innovations. Knoblauch and Schnettler (2010, 292f) define communicative forms as institutionalized communicative processes. Those communicative forms at the same time are constructed by communicative actions as well as prestructure und restrict communicative actions (cf. Knoblauch 1995, 162). They restrict the space for creative actions in favor of proceeding according to typical sequences. In communicative forms like intellectual games, brainstorming and creativity workshops, creative aspects are already inscribed. They have the potential to transform typical communicative patterns by creating discontinuity. However, they are strategically employed, especially when the intention to innovate is made semantically explicit.

A specific framework for the negotiation of ideas with the potential to solve problems is also created through problem-discussions. The probability of innovations increases where problems are explicitly identified and solutions are to be found communicatively.

Nevertheless, according to Gillwald (2000, 19), social innovations do not only imply new solutions that are helpful to overcome crises and conflicts. They may as well construct new problems and conflicts or be strongly contested and face resistance. Precisely these breaks in communication, hinting at self-contradictory argumentations, theses and antitheses, the unfamiliar or even confrontations, can be additional observable evidence for innovations.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Some aspects regarding the methodological consequences of my innovation concept are already discussed in Noack (2014).

If the reconstruction of conflict negotiations and power struggles in negotiation processes of new spatial visions and ideas is in demand, analytical assignments with codes are no longer sufficient. Then, interpretation methods are becoming indispensable. Thus, in terms of data analysis and interpretation procedures of hermeneutics and communication genre analysis are deployed.

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### 3. Hermeneutical Interpretations under the Umbrella of a Focused Ethnography

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To generate a comprehensive understanding of how innovative ideas develop as new forms of knowledge and practice and how they are communicatively negotiated by which actors and groups of actors this paper argues for making use of hermeneutical interpretations. It combines a sociology of knowledge approach to hermeneutics (cf. Soeffner 1989, 1991) with the analysis of communication genres (cf. Günthner and Knoblauch 1994, 1995). This micro perspective on face-to-face negotiations about new space-related ideas visualizes decision situations, power positions and conflict negotiations that help to understand why a potentially innovative idea is modified, or even fails, due to resistance.

Hermeneutic sociology of knowledge is an evolving, complex theoretical, methodological and operational concept. It sets out to (re)construct the social meaning of every form of interaction (linguistic and non-linguistic) and all types of interaction products (art, religion, entertainment, [innovation] etc.) (Reichertz 2011).

This approach is based on the sociological assumption that agents on the one hand must adapt to the given historical, political and social framework on the other hand, however, are also capable of negotiating, modifying and reinventing this framework (cf. Schroer 1997, 109). Soeffner's understanding of sociology due to hermeneutics "is based on the interaction and interpretation skills of actors, on their everyday knowledge as capable and meaningful actors. As a theory of interpretation, it is about the description and explanation of the competences and the common knowledge of actors" (cf. Soeffner 1980, 75f). Thus, a hermeneutical principle of interpretation is applied, according to which the interpretation of actions and communicative statements takes place by including the following action steps and statements (cf. Knoblauch 1995, 91). They also look at the historical discourses and its adoption (cf. Reichertz 2011).

Genre analysis draws back on the theoretical concept of communication genres and its role in the communicative construction of reality. Communication genres can be defined as patterns of communicative actions that are used by the agents as a solution for typical communicative problems. Communication genres differ from spontaneous communicative procedures insofar as those interacting are oriented towards a predictable typology of fixed communication principles (cf. Günthner and Knoblauch 1994, 699). "This means that the com-



position of a series of communicative elements and the various possibilities of its implementation are prepatterned” (Günthner and Knoblauch 1995, 5).

These hermeneutical interpretations are embedded in the methodological framework of a focused ethnography<sup>6</sup> approach as introduced by Knoblauch (2001). Other than classical ethnology, focused ethnography is not interested in a holistic and dense description of the whole research field. This approach – as its name implies – focuses on specific aspects of fields, in my case on face-to-face communications of spatial pioneers from civil society.

Consolidated under a focused ethnography approach I triangulate not only different procedures of analysis but also different sorts of qualitative data. In terms of data triangulation participant observations and problem-centered interviews are combined with ego-centered social network data and public documents. To collect data from “natural” communication settings with a focus on the communicative negotiation of new ideas I am working with participant observation as a key method to observe meetings of civil society networks in Berlin Moabit. Insofar as the direct communicative exchange between spatial pioneers constitutes the main component of their group life, their face-to-face communications have to be the object of an observation which is interested in the genesis and proceeding of social innovations. Over a period of three years I repeatedly observed meetings<sup>7</sup> of spatial pioneers, where communicatively new spatial ideas and visions that respond to social problems and needs in Berlin Moabit are generated and negotiated. To get an idea of the actors who are coming up with new ideas, of their motives, values, aims and intentions to be innovative I apply problem-centered narrative interviews. Those narrative interviews provide information about the extent to which these spatial pioneers pursue a semantically explicated intention to be innovative or whether they distance themselves from an innovation ambition in their project involvement. The methodological triangulation is complemented by a qualitative network approach in order to explore engagement-related network<sup>8</sup> ties of spatial pioneers, since by “qualitative network analysis does the network of interactions become accessible the way it is perceived by the interviewed actor. This perception is the basis

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<sup>6</sup> The paper outlines the way of analyzing social innovations by methodologically combining a process-accompanying perspective with a focused ethnography (cf. Knoblauch 2001) as it is accomplished in my PhD project “Social innovations initiated bottom-up. How innovative spatial pioneers contribute to the communicative (re-)construction of spaces in Berlin Moabit.”

<sup>7</sup> A total number of 24 of such meetings with an average duration of two hours have been observed and partly analyzed. On this basis, I draw conclusions in regard to what influence specific patterns of communication, established role models, processes of power and trust-building, conflict negotiation processes as well as intra-group positions of creative actors have on the introduction, the adaptation, and the joint implementation of innovative ideas.

<sup>8</sup> I understand networks as social forums of communication in which not only space-related social knowledge is generated, conveyed and made applicable (cf. Christmann and Büttner 2011), but also communications on a wider array of topics can take place.

for his interventions” (Häussling 2006, 148). They provide information on how spatial pioneers deploy networking strategies and whether new ideas are successfully implemented or may fail because of lacking network resources. Spatial pioneers can not only be asked about their intentions to be innovative and their communication processes, where something new for the local space is negotiated. Provided that they meet public interest, innovation attributions as well as social and spatial consequences of social innovations can also be found discursively in public documents and media products. With the help of discourse and document analysis it is possible to reveal whether a social innovation has been socially accepted by the public or not, and if it is attributed to be an innovation or whether it meets medially articulated resistance or even ignorance.<sup>9</sup> The discourse analysis of selected print and online media products enabled me to reconstruct the various facets of the innovation discourse,<sup>10</sup> to entangle different discourse statements and even to position them against each other.

An important advance in knowledge creation about the communicative proceeding of social innovations was created by the triangulation of the different qualitative methods of analysis and data types introduced (cf. figure 1).

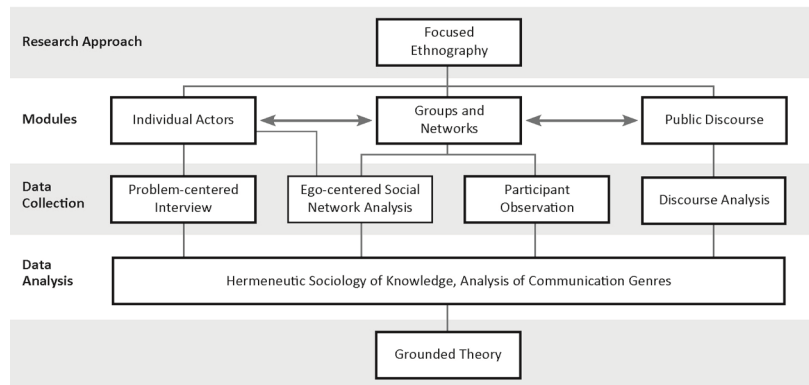
Following that, the hermeneutical interpretations of the observed communication processes have always been informed by knowledge gained through interviews, network and discourse analysis. For example, the decision for or against a new idea can only be properly understood with an additional focus on motives, values and networking strategies of the involved actors. As a researcher I had to trace the (inter-)action practices of my research subjects – here spatial pioneers from civil society – step by step, in order to find out how they seek meaning in their interpretations and decisions (cf. Reichertz 2011). Before the paper illustrates the way I deployed hermeneutical methods for the interpretation of early innovation phases it will expose the concept of spatial pioneers as well as my three case studies of spatial pioneer initiatives.

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<sup>9</sup> The spatial pioneer initiatives in Moabit are first and foremost addressed by the local press. Journalists attributed the spatial pioneers and their project ideas to be potentially new, different or even innovative and to have an influence on local transformation processes.

<sup>10</sup> Innovation discourses can be seen as prestructuring elements in communicative actions of spatial pioneers (and probably beyond them). They almost enforce actors to talk about newness, originality, experiments and new ideas as everyday categories of the scientific innovation concept. Through them, innovation is reproduced in the thinking and behavior of the actors.

**Figure 1: Hermeneutical Interpretations under the Umbrella of a Focused Ethnography of Innovations**



Source: Own research.

Spatial pioneers<sup>11</sup> are able to generate ideas that serve as a starting point for local social innovations with the potential to change and dynamize spatial knowledge and social practices (cf. Christmann and Jähnke 2011), as well as for spatial development in general. In previous studies spatial pioneers have mainly been associated with representatives of civil society or creative industries that use devaluated space as a means of realizing their ideas and creating space for development and freedom (cf. Lange and Matthiesen 2005). I understand spatial pioneers as a heuristic concept for actors and groups of actors that go beyond their own spatial interests. They initiate, encourage and socially maintain new solutions for local social problems in certain quarters. This perspective includes creative freelancers and civil society actors, entrepreneurs and representatives of organizations (whether they are public or independent) as well as political and administrative representatives, provided that they follow new paths. Those initiative actors moreover dissociate themselves from a perception of Moabit as a problem area by maintaining a positive spatial image of the quarter as a space for opportunities and creativity. Thus, social problems in urban quarters do not per se rule out social innovation processes. The crisis of an entire district or a particular quarter may even be a productive factor, by forcing to break new grounds. Spatial pioneers have an impact on the innovative performance of urban spaces that already look back to a long history of problems,

<sup>11</sup> Although the scientific debate about open innovations and participatory innovation processes increasingly draws attention to users' needs and their integration, the field of bottom-up innovations from civil society is underexposed in the social sciences, especially compared to companies and research institutions as sources of innovation. Neither the innovation orientation of civil society actors in general nor of spatial pioneers in particular, has been given wider attention by social innovation research.

like Berlin Moabit.<sup>12</sup> Spatial pioneers do not usually act as isolated figures, but are embedded in network-structured co-operations in order to implement innovative project ideas. In those spatial pioneer networks – as it is also the case in Berlin Moabit – actors negotiate new ideas for spatial (re-)creation on the basis of their problem perception. Those idea negotiation processes are traced in three case studies of spatial pioneer initiatives in Berlin Moabit. All three cases are structurally varying in relation to innovation semantics, pragmatics and grammar. In regard to their innovation relations, they are intendedly selected in contrast to each other with the potential to capture the structural similarities in the communicative genesis of new spatial ideas. This is why they are analyzed as three different cases instead of one case study of spatial pioneer initiatives in Moabit. On the other hand, the case selection did not completely follow a most different systems design to have some variables remaining constant. What they do have in common among other things is their belonging to the civil society field and their geographical location in Moabit.<sup>13</sup>

The Citizens Association of Moabit (case A) represents the first case study. The main objective of A is to bring together committed residents of the urban quarter to establish a basis for neighborly activities as well as enabling citizens' potential to take responsibility. They are organizing diverse social activities, such as playground supervision, tenants and legal advice and the organization of neighborhood festivals. Against the backdrop of the decline of public funding, especially the chairman and spatial pioneer Robert Zimmermann is intendedly looking for innovative solutions to finance the social activities. Therefore, he regularly initiates negotiation processes about new opportunities to earn money. Their main idea is to locally adopt a new social entrepreneurship approach to find entrepreneurial solutions like fundraising or advertising for companies on terms of financial help, for the preservation of the associations' diverse social activities.

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<sup>12</sup> The district is affected by the negative image of being the location of a prison, it is characterized by deprivation and threatened by the erosion of social cohesion. Thus, from an outside point of view residents are mainly seen as unemployed, migrants and recipients of transfer payments. In addition to these negative stigmata, practices of social exclusion going as far as to the exclusion of urban quarters as a whole in comparison to other urban areas undermine spatial processes of identification. Whereas some Moabit quarters in close vicinity to the new Berlin central station become increasingly attractive for real estate developers and are confronted with gentrification and revaluation processes, others suffer from a so-called "brain drain" (cf. Lange and Matthiesen 2005). Educational disadvantages and deficits encourage particularly young, education-oriented families to move away.

<sup>13</sup> Of vital importance in the process of selecting cases was the preknowledge about spatial pioneer initiatives I gained through my cooperation in the research project "Spatial pioneers in urban quarters: towards a communicative (re-)construction of spaces in transition." Accordingly, I used analytical results that already indicated differences as well as similarities and partly substituted case selection processes like the search for typical cases, for extreme cases or for counterexamples.

The Citizens' Homepage of Moabit (case B) was founded in 2005. This local web portal is the first and only exclusively run by volunteers in Moabit. It has evolved into one of the most important means of communication in the district, attracting about 14,000 visitors per month. Mr. Zimmermann, who we already got to know from the citizens association, is also part of this five-person group. In spite of the personnel doubling of innovation-affine Mr. Zimmermann, the group confines itself to a great extent to the negotiation of ideas. They result from the common perception of problems, without applying a novelty-standard from the start. Although – again – it is Zimmermann who aims at the difference from the ordinary, his shaping power is limited due to the presence of other assertive actors. As a result, he cannot bring his usual innovation-claims to be as effective as in the citizen's association of Moabit. The example illustrates how an innovation is implemented as part of routinized activities on the pragmatic level without being accompanied by innovation semantics. The attribution of being something new is here deriving from media actors, who evaluate those local, bottom-up internet portals as innovations. Only some years after the founding of the homepage local interactive blogs are denoted with the new term hyperlocal journalism and conceived of as social innovations.

The Image Association of Moabit (case C) represents my third case study. The image association is starting from the perception that Moabit lacks of diverse cultural activities. The group explicitly devoted itself to create new cultural projects, so that young people can spend the evenings and weekends in the district without leaving in the direction of Neukölln or Kreuzberg. They are organizing comical bingo events or have refurbished an old English callbox they now want to use for very unusual things. For example they discussed about implementing the smallest club in the world in this callbox, a book exchange or even an art exhibition. As fixed item of their monthly meeting agenda the exchange about new project ideas for spatial development is part of their routinized communicative actions.

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#### 4. The Application of Hermeneutical Interpretations in the Communicative Genesis of New Ideas by Spatial Pioneers

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To trace the communicative actions of spatial pioneers and to gain knowledge about their potential to communicatively generate new or even innovative solutions for local social problems, the paper suggests the application of hermeneutical interpretations in the context of social innovation research. The extremely intensive, but also time-consuming hermeneutical interpretation procedures have not been applied to the entire corpus of data. In particular, sequences which are already identified within the coding method of grounded

theory as key sequences of negotiating newness were hermeneutically interpreted. These were mainly associated with the expectation to generate further insights in the communicative genesis of new ideas respectively in early phases of social innovation processes. Basically, I followed sequence-analytic principles, according to which the interpretation of actions and communicative statements takes place by including the following action steps and statements (cf. Knoblauch 1995, 91). Then, different interpretations are developed for each data segment. Therefore, I had to break artificially with familiar orientations and self-evidence and must reorientate (cf. Soeffner and Hitzler 1994, 35). To question and prove subjective interpretations, to avoid a hermeneutic circle and to widely achieve intersubjectivity I worked with interpretation groups (together with academic colleagues and students).

Regarding the communication genre analysis, first of all the structural order of communicative acts became relevant. Thus, rhetorical figures, stylistic devices, gestures, facial expressions, and the usage of specific terms and phrases were taken into account with regard to the internal structural level. Communicative repair techniques, coordination rules as well as the situational relationship of the actors involved were also taken into consideration as part of the interactive intermediate level. This was merely indicated by Luckmann, but more elaborated by Günthner and Knoblauch (cf. 1994, 704) and defined as situational implementation level. Finally, communicative frames, relations of the communicants as well as the structural conditions of the situation – Luckmann (1989, 39) refers to this as external structural level – were incorporated in the interpretation process. These interpretation procedures will be illustrated by the comparison of two selected transcription sequences of the citizens homepage of Moabit (case B) and the image association of Moabit (case C). They enable to understand and categorize actions and action principles by illuminating linguistic expressions.

In the context of the agenda item “new actions” – and therefore linguistically directly in the communicative context of the negotiation of new ideas – the chairperson of the image association of Moabit (case C) Isabel Richter initializes an “open mind discussion” in the November 2012 meeting.

### Meeting of the Image Association of Moabit in November 2012

Mrs. Blomquist: That means this telephone booth stays there and we can think about what to do with it.

Mrs. Borsig: Flowers!

Mrs. Blomquist: You could of course make flowerbeds or something else of it.

Mrs. Richter: You maybe also could use it as an exhibition room.

Mrs. Blomquist: As a mini-exhibition room? For that the windows are a bit too small. You can badly look into from outside.

Mrs. Richter: Mhm.

Mrs. Borsig: And electricity is missing.

Mr. Birke: Or put someone inside for 24 hours as a protest campaign.

Mrs. Blomquist: You can just put someone inside.

Mrs. Richter: What?

Mr. Birke: Put someone inside as a protest campaign, for 24 hours.

Mrs. Richter: With a sign in the hands.

Mr. Birke: Exactly.

Mrs. Blomquist: I've contacted a person who truly berlin-wide, he is pensioner, converts such telephone booths into this swap meets. //Mrs. Borsig: Book exchange.// Totally dedicated guy, bends your ears without an end when you are once speaking with him on the phone. [...] And funnily he is doing currently two telephone booths, one in Spandau and one in Charlottenburg. He was totally excited.

Mrs. Richter: But then he got the measurements, how handy.

Mrs. Blomquist: But he is doing that somehow with some youth, schools and whatever, so then that they really refurbish the telephone booth and take care of it afterwards and so on. Meanwhile he is building such solar on top, then they have light as well and and and [...].

Mrs. Blomquist: So we have so to say just to make a suggestion, the district authority is happy somehow, if someone looks after that thing. What we will propose to them doesn't matter, so not totally, but that it preserves and so on, but we have a big, well range what to do with that thing.

Mrs. Borsig: So you could for example think totally strange, you could place Martin there with his guitar and he will just play.

Mr. Birke: But there is no space for me, right?

Mrs. Heine: Is a little narrow, isn't it? [Group laughing.]

Mr. Birke: Well, in practice I would say I'm going to buy a disco ball next week.

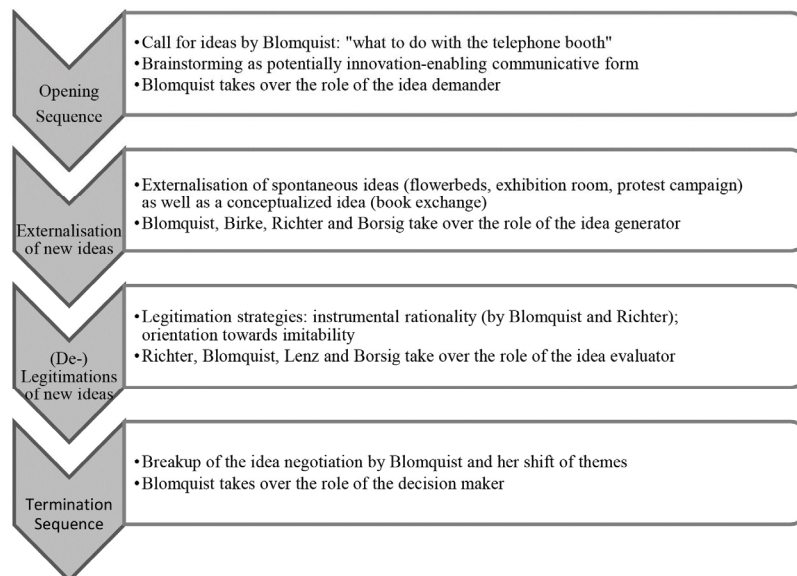
Mrs. Borsig: That we will get for free at a pinch.

Mrs. Blomquist: Can I just move a little further? There is this idea to make a bicycle- out of the wine-tour thing, to make a wine-tour with bicycle.

Mrs. Blomquist raises the "rescue" of the English telephone booth on the agenda, which is in a very dilapidated condition. When emphasizing that local authorities gave their permission for the usage of the telephone booth by the image association (not printed in this segment) she calls for ideas ("think about what to do with it") and therefore acts as an idea demander, who creates a communicative framework for the negotiation of novelty. Following this, different ideas for the conversion of the telephone booth are externalized. Janine Borsig is thinking about the integration of flowerbeds, whereas Richter emphasizes the relevance of an exhibition room. Support for the latter idea, however, fails due instrumental rationality ("windows are a bit too small"; "electricity is missing") by Nina Blomquist and Janine Borsig. Furthermore, the physical protest potential of the telephone booth missed collective passion in the group.

In this negotiation sequence the linguistic difference between pre-structured, conceptualized ideas on the one side and spontaneous ideas on the other side becomes visible through hermeneutical interpretations of specific terms and phrases. Spontaneous ideas are mostly expressed by modal verbs and in conjunctive modes (“could make flowerbeds”; “could use it as exhibition room”). In contrast, Nina Blomquist proposes her ideas of a book exchange in a more confident and detailed way. The idea already indicates a certain level of maturity, by describing the legal framework and anticipating counter-arguments (rumors of a museum placement of the telephone booth). At the end of the argument Blomquist enlivens the experimental design and creative potential of those present (“we have a big, well range what to do with that thing”). This leads to “totally strange” ideas when for example Mrs. Borsig anticipates a guitar-playing Martin Birke in the call box. When Mrs. Blomquist encourages the members to externalize their spontaneous ideas in a humorous manner she also acts in the role of decision making when she breaks up the ideas negotiation by a shift of themes.

**Figure 2: The Structural Principle of Idea Negotiations in the Image Association of Moabit**



Source: Own research.

Those preliminary structural hypotheses regarding linguistic differences and distinctions of interaction roles must be proved by comparisons to other interaction sequences of the image association. The analysis will now continue until a typing can be deduced from the analyzed sequences. Then, what starts to



appear is characteristic not only for this sequence but also for many others of the image association: the negotiation of new ideas goes along with typical sequences. It starts with an opening sequence, mostly a communicative form that invites brainstorming, followed by the generation of a new idea, a legitimization phase and a termination sequence (cf. figure 2).

The distinction between four different phases of an idea negotiation process cannot only be found in face-to-face communication of the image association. They are also part of problem discussions in the Moabit website. Those comparisons between interactional (after transcription: textual) elements of different groups are necessary to avoid a hermeneutical circle. They enable to swing back and forth between text and context to uncover the rules of communication.

As a means to raise the number of volunteers who write articles on the citizens' homepage (case B), the editorial team has developed the idea of implementing the festival "Moabit is writing." The festival aims at lowering possible thresholds for publishing texts, arousing excitement for writing articles and thus sustainably attracting new volunteer-journalists to the web portal, as Mr. Zimmermann summarized in an earlier meeting. Since the festival did not achieve the intended effect after lasting for six weeks, the editorial team met again in May 2012. The meeting was framed by Mrs. Lenz' problem-definition as she asked "why is the festival 'Moabit is writing' not working?" In this sense, she adopted the communicative role of the "problem-raiser." Searching for an answer to this question, the present team members initially reflected possible reasons for the lack of resonance, such as the way of promoting the festival or the necessity of special knowledge as a prerequisite for writing articles. Such rationalizations alternated with proposals concerning solutions to the problem and hinted at the potentiality of the emergence of new ideas. Though the group did not explicitly intend to develop new ideas, they could come along with such a problem discussion as a kind of communicative form. In this setting Mr. Höfig made the following proposal.

#### Editorial Meeting of the Citizens' Homepage of Moabit in May 2012

Mr. Höfig: Maybe there are some readers of the citizens' homepage of Moabit who are rich?

Mr. Zimmermann: Rich?

Mr. Höfig: Rich and readers of the citizens' homepage.

Mr. Zimmermann: How would you define rich? And what's next?

Mr. Höfig: Yes, really well... //Mr. Zimmermann: Yes, yes// really admire us, too.

Mr. Zimmermann: Yes, okay.

Mrs. Klaus: And printing out the background color with leaf gold. [Everyone laughs.]

Mr. Zimmermann: Okay. Well then?

Mr. Höfig: Well, if they, if they care and they've got that much money somehow, maybe they can offer something eventually, so to speak.

Mrs. Klaus: But right now we're not talking about us needing money.

Mr. Höfig: No, I was just thinking, how to, let's say, this festival, we have this price. Well, we agreed, that it's a contest //Mrs. Klaus: Yes// means, a competition. There's going to be some food that we will prepare. Well, that's not exactly a super-incentive, is it? Now, if you write, somehow-

Mr. Zimmermann: It can be really nice.

Mr. Höfig: – first place, an I-Pad, second place, an I-Phone, third place, an I...

Mr. Zimmermann: But then it's just like any other.

Mr. Höfig: – then they will write like mad.

Mrs. Klaus: Maybe, yes.

Mr. Zimmermann: But, you know... it's exactly like that with the kids in the neighborhood, it's like, they only function, if you throw in some money, you know? ((A woman who had come to visit leaves. Mrs. Lenz was talking to her the whole time. Meanwhile, the remaining four people continued debating)). They don't do anything without [money] by now. That is... I think that's //Mrs. Klaus: Capitalism, no doubt.// Mrs. Lenz: Yes.// well they, they, well the food idea is somehow ideal for those, who we're actually looking for, because they can make contact and //Mrs. Klaus: Yes.// and that's actually ideal for the group we are looking for. An I-Pad or something like that-

Mr. Höfig: Oh, that was for no particular reason.

Mr. Zimmermann: I mean, you're right, but then we'll only get those who are keen on the I-Pad, no matter what //Mr. Höfig: Yeah, well that's// //Mrs. Lenz: Exactly.// //Mrs. Klaus: They're together so quickly// but they're not, philosophically, committed.

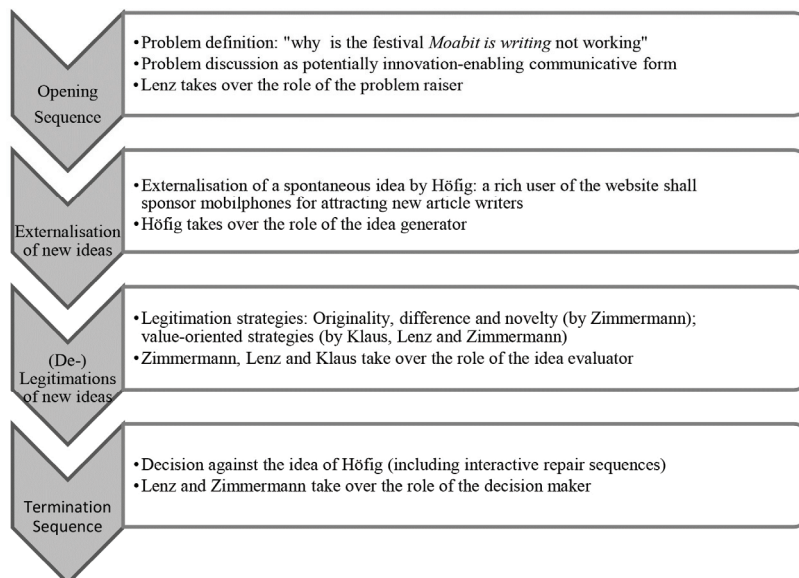
Mrs. Lenz: I think that, well, so far, everybody whom I've told that there will be a common meal, thought that it's a great idea //Mr. Zimmermann: Yeah// so.

Mr. Zimmermann: Yes, I think so, too. //Lenz: Yes// That's great.

Initially, Mr. Höfig asked the present team members – and therefore acted in the role of an idea generator – if there are rich users of the website. Before he had the opportunity to give an explanation of his question in order to be able to explain his idea, he got interrupted by Mrs. Klaus and Mr. Zimmermann who questioned him about his definition of richness. Höfig added – still quite vaguely – that a wealthy patron could “maybe,” “somehow” offer “something” rewarding. Mr. Höfig's multiple use of modal verbs marked his proposal a possible course of action and spontaneous idea, which he externalizes for the first time within the communicative form of the problem-discussion. Zimmermann subsequently devalued the originality of such media as a reward and claimed that this idea is not new but very conventional (“But then it's just like any other”) in opposition to the suggested common dinner. In the role of the idea evaluator he did not want to replace the special singularity of the current

reward system with what he regards as a very ordinary idea. Zimmermann delegitimized Höfig's idea as unoriginal and did not tolerate it as something different or even new. He not only considered what stands out due to difference to be legitimate, but also what corresponds with his own moral concepts and the intended development of the district (dinner as countermovement against the dominance of materialistic value systems). Furthermore, he used a marketing-like argument when presenting the dinner as coherent to the aim of sustainable attraction of a specific clientele to the website. The support Mr. Zimmermann gained for his perspective from the idea evaluators Mrs. Lenz and Mrs. Klaus made Mr. Höfig relativize the problem solving potential of his idea ("Oh, that was for no particular reason.") and finally drop it. Face-saving activities like Mr. Zimmermann's following attempt to ensure at least the plausibility of Mr. Höfig's unsuccessful idea reproduced an atmosphere of trust, repaired the communicative form and enabled – with the help of such communicative strategies of managing problems – a constructive consideration of ideas.

**Figure 3:** The Structural Principle of Idea Negotiations in the Citizens' Homepage of Moabit



Source: Own research.

Similar to the negotiation sequence of case C the negotiation in B starts with an opening sequence, if not with a communicative form that invites brainstorming but starts from a problem perception, followed by the generation of a new idea, the legitimation phase and the concluding sequence with the decision about the

idea. Increasingly, an egalitarian exchange-process between the present team members is institutionalized, in which everyone can generally take any role that is bringing up problems, contributing, evaluating or ratifying ideas (even though Mr. Zimmermann brings up ideas more frequently, while instead of Mrs. Lenz or Mrs. Klaus structure the meetings and evaluate ideas) (cf. fig. 3).

As part of the interpretation process it became increasingly clear that experimental forms like brainstorming were intendedly chosen for creating new projects in face-to-face interactions, but do not proceed in free, spontaneous, hardly predictable paths. Systematic comparisons between idea negotiation processes in the groups A, B and C observed from year 2010 to 2013 illustrate the contrary. The interaction about new space-related ideas – initiated by brainstorming or problem discussions – often follows typical sequences with pattern-like opening and concluding forms and comes along with habitualized interaction roles. Enriched by ethnographic knowledge it is possible “to swing back and forth between induction and deduction in terms of a hermeneutic spiral [...] to develop a Grounded Theory” (cf. Mey and Mruck 2007) of communication processes in social innovations. Ontologically, those substantial theories here addressed are empirically grounded (cf. Glaser and Strauss 1967) and middle ranged on the societal meso-level.

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## 5. Possibilities and Limits of Hermeneutical Interpretations in Ethnographies of Innovations

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Finally, I want to reflect on the opportunities as well as on the challenges of hermeneutical interpretations for ethnographic research on the communicative genesis of social innovations in situ. A main effort of my hermeneutical approach is the detailed knowledge and thick descriptions that can be gained about specific elements and their interplay in innovation processes. By interpreting “natural”<sup>14</sup> group meetings of spatial pioneers I was able to analyze the ways in which actors introduce, negotiate, modify and collectively validate their spatial visions and project ideas with respect to conflicts, resistance and power constellations. While changing from hermeneutical interpretations on the one hand and comparing my cases<sup>15</sup> for substantial theorizing on the other hand, my analysis elucidates that negotiations of novelty are organized according to certain patterns. In the course of the first data analysis and interpretation concerning negotiation processes of new ideas of the pioneering initiatives, the

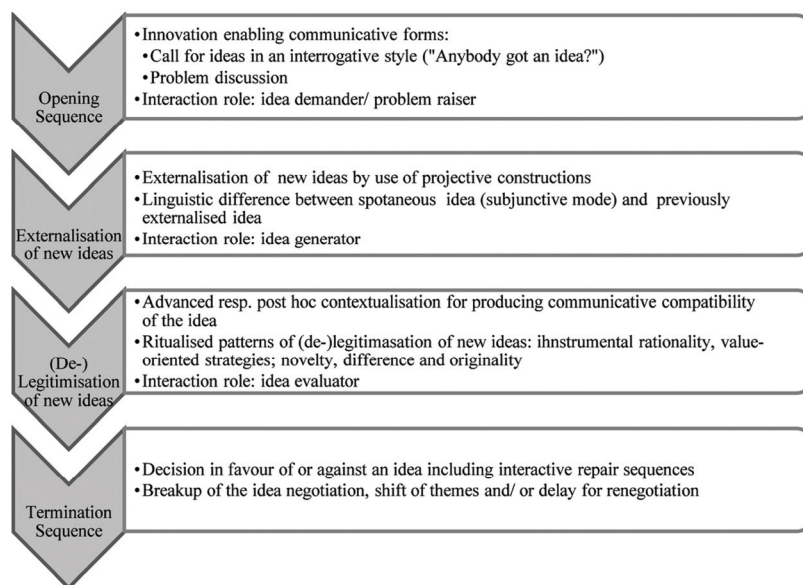
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<sup>14</sup> As a methodological category, “naturalness” focuses on actually running communicative performances and intentions instead of a priori or a posteriori legitimations as they are part of interviews (cf. Knoblauch 1995, 88).

<sup>15</sup> By hermeneutics not only interpretation methods but also comparative procedures, which are very often still missing in innovation studies, are integrated in innovation research.

communication genre analysis was not even included. Associations with the social innovation concept rather suggested experimental and creative forms of communicative exchanges. As part of the analysis, however, it became increasingly clear that experimental forms like brainstorming were intendedly chosen for creating new projects in face-to-face interactions, but do not proceed in free, spontaneous, hardly predictable paths. The micro perspective on idea negotiations explores the innovation communication as being a communicative, determined and standardised pattern of action that follows typical sequences and goes along with habitualized interaction roles. It might indeed come as a surprise that of all things the communicative exchange about novelty, generally characterised as being experimental in the early stages, focuses on ritualised communication patterns and standardised communicative forms (cf. figure 4).

Figure 4: The Communication Genre of Negotiating Novelty



Source: Own research.

Since the observed communicative actions are always related to a given frame of reference they are evolving from, this interpretation also involves a structural perspective. Thus, by hermeneutics societal rules of communication can be uncovered.

The communicative problems for which such solutions are socially established and deposited in the social stock of knowledge tend to be those which touch upon the communicative aspects of those kinds of social interaction which are important for the maintenance of a given social order (Luckmann 1992, 228, quoted from Mayes).

It is a future task for cross-sectoral research in additional social and spatial fields<sup>16</sup> to answer the following questions: To what extent is this knowledge of how to negotiate new ideas not only detectable for the intensely studied cases in Moabit, but also part of the knowledge stock of civil society in general or even part of the social stock of knowledge?

Furthermore, the combination of hermeneutics in the context of ethnographies of innovations is insightful even though a new idea for problem-solving may not spatially spread and evolve into a recognized innovation; because even that failure to attract recognition reveals evidence, e.g. regarding conducive and hindering factors of innovation creation. Different from mainstream innovation literature (cf. Brown and Ashman 1999; Brinkerhoff 1999; Bouwen and Steyaert 1999), the knowledge heterogeneity of actors cannot be assessed as being conducive to innovation processes in general. Innovation producing actors potentially are facing severe communication difficulties, due to knowledge heterogeneity. These problems already restrict innovation processes at the stage of creatively expressing ideas. There, the creative potential of participatory actors is threatened by social conflicts and power rivalries.<sup>17</sup>

It is this new scientific knowledge that mostly advocates for hermeneutical interpretations in ethnographies of innovations. On the other hand, interpretations are never completely independent from subjective meanings, collective knowledge as well as their social and historical context they derive from. In this case, hermeneutics allow for scientific interpretations by way of a necessary differentiation from everyday understanding. “Unlike the ordinary man the scientific interpreter tries, whenever he works with hermeneutic methods, to gain clarity on the conditions and the methods of his understanding” (Soeffner and Hitzler 1994, 32). They provide rules and procedures to trace the (inter-)action practices step by step, in order to find out how actors seek meaning in their interpretations and decisions (cf. Reichertz 2011).

All in all, hermeneutical interpretation procedures offer a methodological path for an empirically profound analysis of the communicative genesis of social innovations. Under the umbrella of focused ethnography they enable to create knowledge on the role communication plays when social innovations come into being in their early stages by “start(ing) out with interaction, and assume that interaction is all there is” (cf. Law 1992, 380). Thus, hermeneutical interpretations of linguistic expressions and communicative actions point to society’s structures and functions.

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<sup>16</sup> My empirical data of civil society actors in Berlin Moabit indicate that the generation of novelty is still not a *sine qua non*, but more and more powerful for the legitimacy of civil society action.

<sup>17</sup> Analytical insights of the situational interdependence of knowledge heterogeneity, conflicts, power constellations and trust-building in social innovation processes are illustrated in more detail in Noack and Schmidt (forthcoming).

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